



April 10, 2002

Ms. Constance Allison
General Counsel
Office of the Honorable Stephen E. Ogden
Texas State Senate
P.O. Box 12068
Austin, Texas 78711-2068

OR2002-1784

Dear Ms. Allison:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID#161077.

The Office of Senator Stephen E. Ogden received a request for "any and all correspondence from [a named] Midway, Texas citizen . . . directed to your office concerning any and all issues." You claim that the requested information is excepted from disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code. We have considered the exception you claim and reviewed the submitted information.

Section 552.101 excepts from disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision." This section encompasses information protected by other statutes. You assert that records of communications between citizens and members of the legislature are confidential under sections 306.003 and 306.004 of the Government Code. In Open Records Decision No. 648 (1996), we addressed the application of these confidentiality provisions. Sections 306.003 and 306.004 of the Government Code work together to provide a measure of confidentiality for records of communications between citizens and members of the legislature. *Id.* at 1-2. Both statutes grant members of the legislature the discretion to release information covered by the statutes. *Id.* at 2.

Section 306.003 provides as follows:

- (a) Records of a member of the legislature or the lieutenant governor that are composed exclusively of memoranda of communications with residents of this state and of personal information concerning the person communicating

with the member or lieutenant governor are confidential. However, the member or the lieutenant governor may disclose all or a part of a record to which this subsection applies, and that disclosure does not violate the law of this state.

(b) The method used to store or maintain a record covered by Subsection (a) does not affect the confidentiality of the record.

The confidentiality provision in section 306.003(a) applies to the records of a member of the legislature or of the lieutenant governor consisting of two kinds of information: 1) records of memoranda of communications with Texas residents and 2) records of personal information about the person communicating with the legislator or lieutenant governor. *Id.* Thus, "personal information" about a person communicating with a legislator or the lieutenant governor is within section 306.003(a) even if it is not recorded in a memorandum prepared by the member. *Id.* While section 306.003(a) deems confidential the communications subject to the provision, it gives a legislator the discretion to disclose all or part of such record. Gov't Code § 306.003(a).

While section 306.003 applies to legislative records consisting of memoranda of communications and records of a correspondent's personal information, section 306.004 refers to the communications themselves. Section 306.004 provides as follows:

(a) To ensure the right of the citizens of this state to petition state government, as guaranteed by Article I, Section 27, of the Texas Constitution, by protecting the confidentiality of communications of citizens with a member of the legislature or the lieutenant governor, the public disclosure of all or part of a written or otherwise recorded communication from a citizen of this state received by a member or the lieutenant governor in his official capacity is prohibited unless:

- (1) the citizen expressly or by clear implication authorizes the disclosure;
- (2) the communication is of a type that is expressly authorized by statute to be disclosed; or
- (3) the official determines that the disclosure does not constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy of the communicator or another person.

(b) This section does not apply to a communication to a member of the legislature or the lieutenant governor from a public official or public employee acting in an official capacity.

(c) A member or the lieutenant governor may elect to disclose all or part of a communication to which this section applies, and that disclosure does not violate the law of this state.

Gov't Code § 306.004. A "communication" includes "conversation, correspondence, and electronic communication." Gov't Code § 306.001. The communication is not subject to public disclosure unless one of the three conditions stated in section 306.004(a) apply. As with the records within section 306.003(a), a legislator has discretion to disclose all or part of the records subject to section 306.004(a).

After reviewing the submitted information, we agree that it consists of communications that are confidential pursuant to section 306.004. You state that none of the conditions in section 306.004(a) apply to the communications. Furthermore, we agree that the information consists of the senator's records of communications with residents of this state that are confidential under sections 306.003(a). Accordingly, access to the submitted information is governed by sections 306.003 and 306.004 of the Government Code. Therefore, you may withhold the submitted information from the requestor.

This letter ruling is limited to the particular records at issue in this request and limited to the facts as presented to us; therefore, this ruling must not be relied upon as a previous determination regarding any other records or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For example, governmental bodies are prohibited from asking the attorney general to reconsider this ruling. Gov't Code § 552.301(f). If the governmental body wants to challenge this ruling, the governmental body must appeal by filing suit in Travis County within 30 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.324(b). In order to get the full benefit of such an appeal, the governmental body must file suit within 10 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.353(b)(3), (c). If the governmental body does not appeal this ruling and the governmental body does not comply with it, then both the requestor and the attorney general have the right to file suit against the governmental body to enforce this ruling. *Id.* § 552.321(a).

If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, within 10 calendar days of this ruling, the governmental body will do one of the following three things: 1) release the public records; 2) notify the requestor of the exact day, time, and place that copies of the records

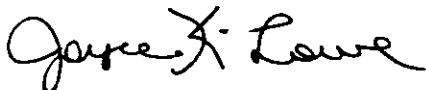
will be provided or that the records can be inspected; or 3) notify the requestor of the governmental body's intent to challenge this letter ruling in court. If the governmental body fails to do one of these three things within 10 calendar days of this ruling, then the requestor should report that failure to the attorney general's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at 877/673-6839. The requestor may also file a complaint with the district or county attorney. *Id.* § 552.3215(e).

If this ruling requires or permits the governmental body to withhold all or some of the requested information, the requestor can appeal that decision by suing the governmental body. *Id.* § 552.321(a); *Texas Department of Public Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408, 411 (Tex. App.--Austin 1992, no writ).

Please remember that under the Act the release of information triggers certain procedures for costs and charges to the requestor. If records are released in compliance with this ruling, be sure that all charges for the information are at or below the legal amounts. Questions or complaints about over-charging must be directed to Hadassah Schloss at the Texas Building and Procurement Commission at 512/475-2497.

If the governmental body, the requestor, or any other person has questions or comments about this ruling, they may contact our office. We note that a third party may challenge this ruling by filing suit seeking to withhold information from a requestor. Gov't Code § 552.325. Although there is no statutory deadline for contacting us, the attorney general prefers to receive any comments within 10 calendar days of the date of this ruling.

Sincerely,



Joyce K. Lowe
Assistant Attorney General
Open Records Division

JKL/sdk

Ref: ID# 161077

Enc: Submitted documents

c: Mr. Donald W. Dean
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(w/o enclosures)